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ABSTRACT

A 1997 survey examined the stress factors and perceived remedies of 45 K-12 student teachers and 40 K-12 cooperating teachers. Stressful events they listed included material selection, unmotivated students, working with peers, supervisor's visits, discipline, preparing for the unexpected, relationships with parents, cooperating teachers, lecture, inconsistent student behavior, time management, power debates with students, and relationships with students. Perceived solutions included expelling disruptive students, inservice workshops, parent involvement, increased security, class size reduction, payment for student teaching, presence or absence of cooperating teacher from the classroom, reduction of interruptions from pull-out programs, reduction or increase in visits by college supervisors, and having full control of the classroom from the beginning to the end of student teaching. Teachers in this survey appeared to prefer more input into the removal of students with disciplinary problems over more computers and supplies, merit pay, or better benefits. One conclusion is that teachers need better preparation for dealing with diverse students and their various needs and with disruptive, unmotivated students. (SM)

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Strengthening the Teaching Profession : Preparing Educators to Cope With Stress

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Abstract

In the process of preparing students to teach, colleges and universities should pay particular attention to the specific stressful problems that teachers face today and endeavor to provide solutions for those problems. This paper discusses some of the items that most pre-service teachers and classroom teachers find stressful and examines possible perceived solutions. The viability of perceived solutions is examined, and the issue of merit pay is summarily reviewed.

In order to strengthen the teaching profession, teacher training programs should endeavor to prepare teachers to teach not just the highly motivated, intelligent student, but also how to teach the poorly motivated, negativistic, problematic student. Teachers are increasingly confronted with " at risk " students and other problematic students. Teacher training programs must attempt to alert pre service teachers to some of the stressors that teachers face, and sensitize them to these stressors and discuss possible solutions, options and alternatives.

There are many stress factors that face teachers today. Recently, Abebe (1997) has investigated some of the factors that are often cited by student teachers as being stressful, and possible solutions. The stress events will first be discussed, then possible solutions delineated, then the discrepancy between the stressful events and the solutions reviewed. The survey items were originally developed by Wright (1985) to assess stress related to teaching events in the classroom. The questionnaire was pilot tested for validity through the use of a panel of experts consisting of supervising and cooperating teachers, administrators, parents and student teachers. The original survey was modified, with permission to meet the specific purpose of this study.

Forty five student teachers (15 elementary, 3 middle school, 17 secondary and 10 K-12) and cooperating teachers

(16 elementary, 4 middle school, 20 secondary school) were surveyed. The stressful events, according to this sample are:

1) Selection of Materials
2) Unmotivated Students
3) Working with Peers
4) Supervisor's Visit
5) Discipline
6) Preparing for the Unexpected
7) Student Teachers/Parents Relationships
8) Cooperating Teacher
9) Lecture
10) Inconsistent Student Behavior
11) Time Management
12) Power Debates with Students
13) Student Teacher/Student Relationship

The student teacher's concerns may differ from the regular classroom teachers worries and troubles. The student teacher may be more preoccupied with unannounced visits from the supervisor, or of losing control of the classroom or of having to deal with some unexpected difficulty for which they are unprepared.

Once hired, and established in a classroom, the stress factors may, of course, abate and diminish. Or on the other hand, having to assume full responsibility for these students may prove even more stressful. The above thirteen stressors were viewed differently by pre-service students and classroom teachers. However, there is congruence on several factors.

Stress Remedies were also examined. The following were seen as " stress remedies ".

1) Expelling disruptive students from class
2) In-Service Program (workshop) during student teaching
3) Parent involvement in some school (classroom) activities
4) Increasing physical security (from fights, gangs, violence)
5) Class size reduction
6) Payment for services for student teaching
7) Presence of cooperating teacher in the classroom all the time
8) Absence of cooperating teacher from the classroom all the time
9) Reduce interruptions caused by pull out programs (students moving in and out while class is in session)
10) To do less lesson planning and grading of assignments
11) Reduce the number of visits by college supervisors
12) Increase the number of visits by college supervisors
13) To have full control of the classroom from the beginning to the end of student teaching.

The above "remedies" were based on a global review of the literature and input from student teachers.

Three " remedies " bear mentioning. Forty of both the cooperating and student teachers think class size reduction is an excellent stress remedy for their situation. This may be the most politically correct remedy seen by some. Twenty three percent of teachers and 14 % of student teachers viewed expulsion as an excellent remedy. This may represent a more conservative or dramatic approach. Many schools are adopting a " zero tolerance " position in regard to disciplinary problems .

Only 5 % of cooperating teachers saw parental involvement as an excellent remedy for stress (while 18 % of the student teachers saw it as an excellent remedy). Eighteen percent of both cooperating and student teachers viewed physical security (more guards etc.) as an excellent remedy for their stress.

Thus, class size reduction and expulsion were seen by teachers as optimal "remedies" for their stressors. Reduced class size may be seen by some teachers to be an alternative to expulsion since very few school employ this alternative. Further, Shaughnessy (1986) has investigated the specific issues regarding merit pay. Many teachers may tolerate stress if they feel that there is some reward for their efforts. When teachers were asked to choose the specific type of rewards that they wanted in a merit pay system, several interesting issues were discerned.

In this survey study, most teachers did not want computers, more supplies, better medical or dental services, or even a reduced class size. They were however, seeking to have more control in terms of having problem students removed from their classes, and perhaps placed in a more appropriate classroom, so that they would not be disruptive.

Teachers, in this survey wanted to be able to have more input into the removal of disciplinary problems. Schools that do have merit pay may want to examine what types of rewards are being offered. Certificates, plaques, and the like may not be as rewarding as being able to have input into the decision to remove a student from a class due to his/her disruptive, or aggressive, assaultive behavior.

If schools are interested in implementing a merit pay system they may need to look carefully at what teachers really want, rather than what they are willing to offer.

Many teachers may not be interested in a cash bonus or a computer, but may want unmotivated, disruptive students removed from their classroom.

Merit pay is one issue that has been around for many years, it has implications for strengthening the teaching profession, yet it has not been clearly implemented and effectively employed for the effective educational progress of students. Merit pay is a complex issue in an age of inclusion wherein it is difficult to objectively measure teacher and student "success".

It appears that classroom management, and discipline strategies as well as motivational strategies are sorely needed in this current school climate. Working with disruptive students with a bad attitude may be becoming more and more problematic. While we may have workshops or in-services on these topics, teachers may need more assistance than a few hour workshop is able to provide. Administrators may not be as supportive of teachers and their disciplinary procedures as they should be. The discrepancy between teacher and principal perception of " discipline " problems may also need to be examined in the future. Some principals are willing to be supportive of their teachers. Other principals may feel that their licensed/certified professionals are adequately trained to deal with these situations.

In terms of the reflective process, student teachers may

want to reflect on what they find stressful and examine the reasons they find these things stressful. Males and females did seem to differ in this study as to what was stressful and what remedies they saw as helpful.

Male and female teachers do differ in their values and priorities and may respond differently to discipline problems and unmotivated students in the classroom. Men may be more action oriented and problem centered, while females may be more patient and understanding.

Summary and Conclusions

If we are to prepare students teachers effectively, we must prepare them not only for the above average, highly motivated cooperative student, but also for the poorly motivated, disruptive, hostile, aggressive at risk student. We may also need to prepare students for a teaching environment where there may not be a plethora for remedies for their stressors. Merit pay may not provide the remedies or reinforcement that teachers need or want. In this age of inclusion, teachers may have to deal with more diverse students and students with multiple handicaps (Shaughnessy, 1996).

Teachers may need much better preparation for dealing with a diverse student body while needing more preparation for dealing with unmotivated, disruptive students.

The teaching profession could be strengthened by

providing programs that will respond to preservice teachers' needs in dealing with stress. It is not uncommon for some student teachers to withdraw from the student teaching program within the first two weeks of the process; some switching to alternative routes to get out of student teaching, and complete a degree program in university studies or other programs. Some students have repeatedly asked for a change of placement; and in even worse, in some cases, some of us have heard or read about suicide being attempted during the student teaching semester.

Is there anything that can be done to reduce stress in order to keep preservice teachers in the program and help them to succeed through their student teaching and their first year of teaching ? Teacher and administrator attitudes toward discipline problems may need to be more carefully examined, and realistic, viable, appropriate solutions may need to be examined and explored. Some schools have examined " non traditional " high schools for some students. Further research may provide the answer to that question.

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